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Gender Games: The Portrayal of Female Journalists on 'House of Cards'

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Abstract

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Disciplines

Communication | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Journalism Studies | Mass Communication | Social Influence and Political Communication

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ABSTRACT:

This textual analysis focused on the portrayal of female journalists on House of Cards. The uneven depictions of six female journalists could have a socializing effect on the audience. The researchers argue that the character Zoe Barnes is depicted as childlike, unprofessional, and unethical, but that the character Ayla Sayyad is depicted as a dedicated watchdog journalist. The researchers then explore the ethical implications of these portrayals through the lens of social responsibility theory.

KEYWORDS:

TELEVISION STUDIES

HOUSE OF CARDS

GENDER

SOCIALIZATION

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY

INTRODUCTION

Female journalists in the popular press have expressed deep concerns and annoyance about the way they recently have been depicted onscreen (Cogan 2015). Fictional female journalists have been seen onscreen since the 1940s in films such as *His Girl Friday*. Newswomen such as Mary Tyler Moore's Mary Richards on her eponymous sitcom and Holly Hunter's Jane Craig on *Broadcast News* (1987) are tough, talented pros. Too often, however, fictional newswomen are shown as a "Super Bitch" or "Super Whore" (Ghiglione 1990) or as "slutty ambition monsters" (Cogan 2015). Such depictions can be seen in such wide-ranging films as *Nightcrawler* (2014), *Bad Words* (2013), *Crazy Heart* (2009), *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *Thank You for Smoking* (2005), *Anchorman* (2004), and *Adaptation* (2002). Female journalists are shown to be unprofessional and unethical, and these depictions foster expectations that real female journalists behave like their fictional onscreen counterparts (Cogan 2015; Painter and Ferrucci 2015; Painter and Ferrucci 2012). Diverse readings of these characters are possible, and there can be ambiguity around meanings for particular representations. However, "Most female journalists portrayed in popular culture are seldom shown as fully developed human beings" (Saltzman 2003).

The purpose of this study is to investigate how female journalists were portrayed on the Netflix series *House of Cards*. The authors then discuss the ethical implications of these characters and portrayals, especially as they relate to socialization of future journalists. *House of Cards* is based on a 1990 BBC series about corruption, power, and ambition in politics and journalism. The Netflix version revolves around the character of Frank Underwood, a Democratic Congressman from South Carolina who later becomes vice president and, ultimately, president. Underwood is loosely based on Francis Urquhart, who, in the BBC series, deviously maneuvers to become prime minister while having an affair with *Chronicle* reporter Mattie Storin. The relationship between politics and the press is prominently featured in both political dramas, which follow the machinations of the political world, paying close attention to the manner in which Underwood (and previously Urquhart) attempts to gain and harness more and more power. *House of Cards* depicts journalism in a similar manner to other television programs, falling into a heroes and villains dichotomy that could "be impactful in relation to public perceptions of the journalist's role" (McNair 2014, 244). Through these black-and-white depictions, as either a hero or villain, journalists are depicted as being either ethically beyond reproach or completely impaired ethically (McNair 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Socialization through popular culture

In its simplest form, feminism is defined as the creation of a society where women are provided the same opportunities as men (Foss 2009). Women on television systematically are underrepresented, usually reduced to traditionally feminine roles, and appear traditionally feminine (Glascock 2001; Elasmr, Hasegawa, and Brain 1999; Atkin 1991). Women portrayed as professionals, such as journalists, are an attempt to break traditional, feminine typecasting. However, even television shows attempting to break the stereotypical genre mold tend to situate female characters within overarching

patriarchal schemes (Butler 1993; Goodstein 1992; Dow 1990). Further, by focusing on women's relationships with men, such shows undermine the importance of the female community by assuming male relationships ultimately have the most importance in women's lives (Tuchman 1978).

The sight of a female reporter on a television screen is nothing new. Female journalists have been featured prominently in programs such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *Lou Grant* (1977-1982), *WKRP in Cincinnati* (1978-1982), *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998), *Lois and Clark* (1993-1997), *News Radio* (1995-1999), *Just Shoot Me* (1997-2003), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Sports Night* (1998-2000), and *The Newsroom* (2012-2014). Feminist identity is expressed most readily on television programs through white, straight, single, professional women working in a man's world (Dow 2002). However, television shows portraying female reporters are not simply about journalism. Instead, journalism is used as a way to explore certain gender-based conflicts: career versus marriage, workplace versus home, co-workers versus family, freedom of the night versus middle-class domesticity, the individual versus the collective, feminism versus femininity, and agency versus victimization (Stillion Southard 2008; Gerhard 2005; Good 1998).

Researchers argue that fictional portrayals can have a powerful impact on perceptions of real-life professionals (Lacalle 2015; Foss 2009; Ehrlich 2005; Murphy 1998) and that cultural conditioning and learning experience affect a woman's career decisions (Hoffner, Levine, and Toohey 2008; Scherer, Brodzinski, and Wiebe 1990). Television and other sources constantly inundate young girls with ideas about cultural norms, and this conditioning reinforces cultural norms of femininity. Socialization of a particular nature, whatever the source, ultimately will become part of an individual's conception of his or her abilities. The media can and do socialize young women about gender identity and intellectual ability, and media portrayals provide socializing messages about women in a certain profession, such as journalism, or women in general (Hylmö 2006; Rosenholtz and Simpson 1984).

Portrayal of female journalists on television

The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-1977) was "informed by and commented on the changing role of women in American society" (Dow 1990, 263). Mary Richards (Moore) was seen throughout the show's run as a positive character, one that redefined understandings of personal relationships (Dow 1990; Winship 1988). Richards, an associate producer and later producer for the Minneapolis television station WJM-TV, was portrayed as being "bright, attractive, well liked" and "generally happy" with "a good job that she perform[ed] well" (Dow 1990, 268).

Candice Bergen's titular character in *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998) can be seen as a more successful version of Richards. Brown, the award-winning network co-anchor of a primetime news magazine, is an unqualified success (Dow 1999). Many consider *Murphy Brown* influenced by or representative of feminism because it is a sitcom based on a single, working woman (Dow 1999).

Sex and the City (1998-2004) starred Sarah Jessica Parker as Carrie Bradshaw, a sex-and-relationships columnist for *The New York Star*. Bradshaw and her friends are successful professionals, and they embrace "the intellectual and sexual freedom, and independence that their success has given them" (Richards 2003, 147). Bradshaw's sex

life and, by extension, her newspaper columns, can be seen “as a product of a longer representational history of women, feminist or not, who sought sexual freedom or freer expression of female sexuality” (Gerhard 2005, 38).

Sports Night (1998-2000) centered on the titular show, a *Sportscenter*-like sports news program. In the show, “sports becomes a metaphor for human accomplishment, drive, pain, loss, and disappointment” (Fahy 2005, 61). The women ostensibly are in charge. Dana Whitaker (Felicity Huffman) and Natalie Hurley (Sabrina Lloyd) run the show-within-the-show, and Sally Sasser (Brenda Strong) produces the sister-show *West Coast Update*. However, the female journalists were depicted as acting unprofessionally, displaying motherly qualities, choosing their personal lives over work, being deferential to men for ethical decisions, and showing a lack of sports knowledge compared to the male characters (Painter and Ferrucci 2012). Further, Dana and Sally are constantly competing professionally and personally, and this competition is shown as the equivalent of a “sophisticated cat fight” (Ringelberg 2005, 97).

Similar to *Sports Night*, the four female journalists in *The Newsroom* (2012-2014) are shown in a less positive manner than their male counterparts (Painter and Ferrucci 2015). Again, the women ostensibly are in charge. MacKenzie McHale (Emily Mortimer) is the executive producer of *News Night*, the show-within-the-show, and Leona Lansing (Jane Fonda) is the owner of the news channel’s parent company. However, critics have argued that these characters, along with reporters Maggie Jordan (Allison Pill) and Sloan Sabbith (Olivia Munn), are an obvious example of creator Aaron Sorkin’s “stale, tone-deaf stereotyping” (Killoran 2013, 1). While McHale is at times seen as heroic, the other female characters are marginalized and function as “supporting players to their more successful male counterparts” (Killoran 2013, 1). Portraying these journalists as unprofessional in the newsroom, inadequate at their jobs, and motherly and weak could negatively influence perceptions of real-world journalists (Painter and Ferrucci 2015).

Social Responsibility theory

In its facilitative role, the media seek to promote dialogue between constituent groups in a society (Christians et al. 2009). The media serve as a community-building forum, encouraging dialog in neighborhoods, churches, and other institutions divorced from state and market forces (Christians et al. 2009). The goal of the facilitative role is to promote pluralism, which is a fundamental need and ideal for a functioning democracy (Christians et al. 2009). The facilitative role is related to social responsibility theory, which is based on a communitarian model that seeks justice, covenant, and empowerment with an ultimate goal of social transformation (Christians, Ferré, and Fackler 1993). A media system based on social responsibility is premised on the idea that freedom of expression is a positive freedom, or a freedom *to do* an action (Berlin 2002). Expression is not an inalienable right, but a right granted to do the morally good act of serving the public (Nerone 1995). Situated in social responsibility theory, the media only make sense in terms of public and public life (Christians et al. 1993). If the media are failing in their normative role to be socially responsible, then the society in which they operate most likely also will be failing. Similarly, if the social, political, and economic systems are failing, then the media will not be able (or as able) to fulfill their role in society.

There is an ethical difference between the news and entertainment media, and ethical standards for entertainment programming such as *House of Cards* are less codified

when compared to news media (Cenite 2009). However, “Boundaries between news and entertainment programming are falling fast.... All of the free-marketplace arguments that traditional news has enjoyed must now be applied equally to entertainment programs” (Christians et al. 2005, 240). Consequently, media ethicists increasingly are exploring the ethical implications of entertainment and amusement (Wilkins 2012), for example, the extent to which cinema engages with gender stereotypes and roles in the representation of journalists. While there is not a codified standard similar to the Hutchins Commission, ethicists argue that entertainment portrayals must serve an overriding public interest if there are foreseeable and substantial negative consequences to those portrayals (Cenite 2009).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How are female journalists depicted on the Netflix show House of Cards?

RQ2: What are the ethical implications of these characters and portrayals?

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the question of how female journalists were depicted on *House of Cards*, researchers conducted a textual analysis of the text and video of the first three seasons (39 episodes) released by Netflix between February 2013 and February 2015. The researchers focused on the portrayal of six female journalists: Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara), 13 episodes; Ayla Sayyad (Mozhan Marnò), 11 episodes; Janine Skorsky (Constance Zimmer), 12 episodes; Kate Baldwin (Kim Dickens), 6 episodes; Carly Heath (Tawny Cypress), 5 episodes; and Margaret Tilden (Kathleen Chalfant), 3 episodes.

Scholars utilize textual analysis when examining television programming because it helps “unearth the meaning of individual programs and links them to broader social formations and problems” (Miller 2010, 23) and helps “identify the ideological tenor of the content” (Miller 2010, 32). In a textual analysis, researchers not only examine the surface content of a program but also aim to unearth all possible meanings (Larsen 1991) and discern “implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text” (Fürsich 2009, 241). Researchers do agree that multiple readings are possible, and that the author of a text might not have intended what the researcher found in his or her reading of the text (Lester-Roushanzamir and Raman 1999).

Textual analysis “proceeds from a long soak in the material to an extremely close reading of a specific text as defined by the researcher” (Lester-Roushanzamir and Raman 1999, 703). Texts were examined several times: Themes emerged during initial viewings, and more viewings were conducted to explore those themes (McKee 2003). While coding themes and patterns, the researchers isolated something “(a) that happened[ed] a number of times and (b) that consistently happen[ed] in a specific way” (Miles and Huberman 1984, 215). Researchers discussed reoccurring themes together in the context of the literature, and returned to the texts in order to glean thick description (Geertz 1973). For increased validity, the researchers compared notes and discussed themes after analyzing one percent, 10 percent, 25 percent, 50 percent, and 100 percent of the sample.

FINDINGS

House of Cards is a deliberately dark, cynical series. Few, if any, characters are depicted positively, including Underwood, a devious character who literally gets away with multiple murders. The show provides both heroic and villainous examples of female journalists during the course of its three seasons. The two major female journalist characters, Zoe Barnes and Ayla Sayyad, can be seen as two ends of that hero-and-villain continuum. Through these black-and-white depictions, the two journalists are portrayed as being either ethically beyond reproach or completely impaired ethically (McNair 2014). The portrayal of Barnes is very negative. She is shown to be childlike, unprofessional, and unethical. She sleeps with sources and colleagues in exchange for information, and she uses that information unquestioningly. She at first is rewarded for her unethical and unprofessional behavior. *Herald* editor Tom Hammerschmidt (Boris McGiver) offers her the paper's White House correspondent position, and she ultimately leaves the *Herald* to report for the online publication *Slugline*, which offers her nearly unedited access to publication. Barnes, however, is punished—by death—when she becomes more professional and ethical, asserting independence from Underwood by acting like a watchdog reporter.

Ayla Sayyad is an exemplary journalist. She eschews sensationalist fluff in favor of pursuing hard-hitting news such as high-level corruption. She uncovers a money-laundering story that brings down the president, and initially is rewarded, like Barnes, with a position as a White House correspondent. However, she ultimately is punished by the Underwood Administration, which convinces the Correspondents' Association to revoke her White House credential when she continues to fulfill her role as a watchdog.

The other four journalists depicted in the series—*Herald* and *Slugline* reporter Janine Skorsky, *Telegraph* reporter Kate Baldwin, *Herald* publisher Margaret Tilden, and *Slugline* publisher Carly Heath—fall in the middle of this continuum. Skorsky initially is depicted as a hard-line reporter, but she ultimately confesses her own sordid past to Barnes and later decides to leave journalism because of her fear of Underwood. Baldwin has a storied background and talks tough, but she is shown to rest on her laurels and pursue a man instead of the news. Tilden and Heath largely are depicted as enablers to Barnes, allowing her unethical and unprofessional behavior as long as her subsequent articles result in readers and clicks.

Barnes begins season 1 as a junior reporter at the *Washington Herald*, which is a thinly veiled version of the *Washington Post*. She often is shown in a childlike manner. She dresses like a college student, wearing hoodies, T-shirts, and jeans to the newsroom; very short, very tight dresses at events; and sweatpants and a sweatshirt in her apartment. Many journalists do dress sloppily, and Barnes' dress does improve; she evolves as a power dresser as she becomes more successful at her career. Further, she typically is shot from a high angle, which accentuates her short and slight frame, and she often is depicted filling only a small portion of the screen. Other characters on the show treat her as if she was a child. *Herald* editor Hammerschmidt scolds Barnes in episode 3 after she comments about him and the paper during a television appearance:

Hammerschmidt: You haven't earned the right to be treated as an adult. You think a few front-page stories and some facetime on TV makes you the next Judy Miller? You've got a long way to go. Don't be so arrogant.

Barnes: OK, so you think when a woman asks to be treated with respect, that's arrogance?

Hammerschmidt: Are you accusing me of sexism?

Barnes: Just making an observation.

Hammerschmidt: No TV for a month.

Barnes: What?

Hammerschmidt: You heard me. No interviews.

Barnes: That's completely unfair.

Hammerschmidt: Want to make it no TV indefinitely? We're done. You can go now.

Hammerschmidt treats Barnes like he is punishing his daughter, taking away her TV privileges and threatening to further the punishment if she continues to talk back to him. If the scene lasted longer, he might have sent Barnes to her room without dinner.

Hammerschmidt is not the only character who treats Barnes like a child. *Herald* owner Margaret Tilden seems like a motherly figure to Barnes, and Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) often gives her career advice, like a father counseling his daughter. Underwood also twice comments on the condition of Barnes' apartment, saying "Do your parents know you live like this?" in episode 4 and "You really ought to get your parents to let you borrow some money, and then you wouldn't have to live in the third world" in episode 7. Underwood treats Barnes as a wayward child. Following the "third world" comment in episode 7, Underwood reminds Barnes that it is Father's Day and that she should call her dad. When she does, Underwood begins performing cunnilingus on her.

Barnes and Underwood had begun a sexual relationship by episode 4. This relationship certainly is a conflict of interest, but Barnes uses it as a way to obtain insider information to write stories that will propel her career. Barnes' first real encounter with Underwood occurs in episode 1, when she visits him at his home, showing a lot of cleavage and referencing a picture taken from an earlier event where Underwood is checking out her posterior. Underwood becomes her primary source, and the level of flirting increases to the point that, by episode 4, she invites Underwood to her apartment. The sexual relationship continues throughout most of season 1, and Barnes' star rises at the *Herald*, and later at the *Politico*-like *Slugline*, because she is able to break a lot of terrific, although sometimes woefully inaccurate, stories based on the information Underwood provides her.

Barnes begins to pull away from the relationship after being questioned by Janine Skorsky and other veteran reporters. Skorsky serves as a model hard-news journalist for much of season 1. She often is shown reporting, taking bits of information and questioning those in power—really, performing the watchdog role unlike Barnes. Skorsky also is shown to be a positive mentor for Barnes, coaching her to become a better, more fearless reporter. For example, in episode 12, Skorsky tells Barnes, "Look, if you weren't afraid, you wouldn't be doing your job. The only articles that I've ever written that truly mattered scared the shit out of me." Skorsky does have a positive influence on Barnes, who begins to do real journalistic work, tracking down sources and serving as a watchdog instead of Underwood's stenographer. However, Skorsky eventually tells Barnes about her own unethical past when the two are in the *Slugline* office in episode 9:

Skorsky: We've all done it. I used to suck, jerk, and screw anything that moved just to get a story.

Barnes: Really? Like who?

Skorsky: You want dish?

Barnes: No, it's just...

Skorsky: The comm. director on Ben Schroeder's Senate race. A staffer in the Defense Department. My very own White House intern. He was a real blabbermouth when he wasn't eating me out.

Barnes: Wow.

Skorsky: And I even had a fling with a Congressman.

Barnes: Which one?

Skorsky: You tell me yours, and I'll tell you mine.

Barnes: I've never been with any.

Skorsky: Oh, come on. You're hot. You're telling me that none of them have come on to you.

Barnes: I haven't really been in those circles.

Skorsky: You are now.

Barnes: I guess I don't really give off that vibe.

Skorsky: Oh, you mean the slut vibe? (Both laugh.) Look, I don't do that shit anymore because once word got out, it was like I hit a wall, and nobody took me seriously. So, a piece of advice as far as career strategies go: It's not worth fucking your way to the middle.

After this conversation, Barnes decides that it is time to end her personal relationship with Underwood, although she wants to maintain their professional relationship. Underwood retaliates by cutting Barnes out of the insider loop, and, after a couple of days of being frozen out of stories, she capitulates and restarts their sexual relationship.

Barnes: So you need a whore? Which makes you a pimp.

Underwood: I'm not a pimp. Just a very generous john.

Barnes: Fine. As long as we're clear about what this is, I can play the whore. Now pay me.

Barnes shows here, and really throughout her time on the show, that she is willing to trade sexual favors for stories. Her unethical behavior is at best a conflict of interest and a lack of independent reporting. However, these ethical lapses are not the only example of her unprofessional behavior.

Throughout season 1 (and until her death early in season 2), Barnes is shown to be more like a stenographer than a reporter, a lapdog instead of a watchdog. She writes any information Underwood gives her, even if she thinks—or knows—that the information is untrue. Journalism is the process of verification (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014). Barnes, however, does not verify her stories, instead she uncritically prints whatever information, or misinformation, Underwood gives her. Underwood feeds Barnes news stories, which will raise her profile while letting him push his agenda through the press.

These stories are important, with wide-ranging implications for the direction of the nation. Barnes effectively kills a liberal version of an education bill by writing about an early draft, ruins the nomination of potential Secretary of State Michael Kern, and leaks the names of two potential vice presidential candidates. She also trumps up the nomination of a second Secretary of State nominee, Katherine Durant, as well as

Congressman Peter Russo's run for Pennsylvania governor, sparking the political careers of two of Underwood's allies. Barnes is rewarded for this lack of professionalism by *Herald* editor Hammerschmidt, who offers her the White House correspondent job, as well as *Slugline* editor Carly Heath, who essentially tells Barnes that she will publish anything she writes without editing it first.

Barnes' unprofessional behavior also affects other journalists. She tries to protect Underwood, and herself, from Skorsky, when the latter attempts to write about Underwood's conspiratorial tactics. Barnes also has sex with Lucas Goodwin (Sebastian Arcelus), her former section editor at the *Herald*, before asking him to give her, a competitor, the name of a source. Barnes continues to have a sexual relationship with Goodwin, who begins helping her and Skorsky in their investigation.

Throughout season 1, Barnes is shown to represent the shallowness of new forms of journalism such as Tweeting and blogging. For example, in episode 1, she is shown having a conversation with Goodwin:

Goodwin: This is the *Washington Herald*, Zoe. It's not TMZ

Barnes: Do you know how many people watch TMZ?

Goodwin: I can care less.

Barnes: Which is why print journalism is dying.

Goodwin: Then it'll die with dignity. At least at this paper.

Later, in episode 3, Barnes, whose profile is rising due to the stories Underwood feeds her, is interviewed on CNN:

Barnes: Tom has very high standards. I love him. (Blows a kiss, a signal to Underwood.) He's a great mentor. Um... It can be frustrating at times. He makes you double and triple check things, and you want to get the news out the moment you have it, and he makes you rewrite until it's perfect, but that's what makes the *Herald* the *Herald*.

On *House of Cards*, digital journalists, specifically Barnes, are shown in a negative manner and as the cause of many journalistic failings. Further, she does not practice an ethical form of journalism, instead breaking major ethical and professional norms. Finally, her primary motivation for doing journalistic work is to attain personal attention and financial success, not to bring truth to readers.

While Barnes is held up as an example of unprofessional and unethical journalism, Sayyad is the exemplar of what a journalist should be and should do. Sayyad, who works for the *Wall Street Telegraph*, a thinly veiled *Wall Street Journal*, wants to report on hard-hitting stories instead of the usual fluff. For example, in episode 18, she is sent to cover a story about an affair that Claire Underwood, Frank's wife, had with a New York photographer. While waiting for the Underwoods to make a statement, Sayyad begins talking to another reporter:

Sayyad: I hate this.

Reporter: What? Waiting?

Sayyad: No, the affair. It's bullshit. I feel like a tabloid hack.

Reporter: Would you rather be stuck at the White House all day?

Sayyad: Fuck this. (Starts packing her reporting gear.)

Reporter: Where are you going?

Sayyad: To do something meaningful with my time.

Sayyad does do something meaningful instead of covering the Underwoods' pseudo-scandal. She flies to St. Louis to interview businessman Raymond Tusk, who has very close ties to President Garrett Walker, because her "gut says there's more to Xander Feng than has been reported." Sayyad's gut, her news reporter's instinct, is correct, and she slowly follows a money trail that links Tusk and Chinese businessman Feng to Daniel Lanagan's Kansas City casino. Sayyad calls Lanagan during episode 23:

Lanagan: Ms. Sayyad. The only reason I returned your call was because you work for the *Telegraph*, and it's not every day I get a call from a paper as big as yours. But I really don't know what you're trying to get at here, so if you'll excuse me...

Sayyad: What about Raymond Tusk?

Lanagan: What about him?

Sayyad: Feng has ties to Tusk. Tusk has ties to the president. You have ties to Feng. That looks like foreign money being used to influence political...

Lanagan: What you're insinuating is not only wrong, it's libelous.

Sayyad: Not if it's true.

Lanagan: I won't bat an eyelash getting my attorneys involved.

Sayyad: Tusk made the same threat. If a man worth \$40 billion doesn't intimidate me, you certainly don't, Mr. Lanagan.

Lanagan launders Chinese money from his casino to the campaign coffers of Democratic politicians, including President Garrett Walker and now Vice President Underwood. Sayyad's reporting, ultimately, forces Walker to resign the presidency. As a result, Underwood becomes president, and Sayyad gets the White House assignment.

Underwood is an unelected and largely unpopular president, and Sayyad attempts to break a story that senior Democratic leaders are pressuring him not to run for reelection and stalling Underwood's signature legislation, AmericaWorks, in the Democrat-controlled Congress. Sayyad is shown in multiple episodes asking tough questions during White House briefings and asking follow-up questions when Underwood and White House Press Secretary Seth Grayson (Derek Cecil) try to dodge her questions. Her tough reporting comes to a head in episode 30 during a one-on-one meeting with Grayson.

Grayson: You wanted me to chew you out.

Sayyad: If that's what it takes to get us talking.

Grayson: Which is why I need your credential.

Sayyad: What?

Grayson: Your credential.

Sayyad: (laughs) You're kidding.

Grayson: Do you see me laughing?

Sayyad: You don't control my credential. The Correspondents' Association does.

Grayson: And I just spoke to Joel Wineman.

Sayyad: He wouldn't.

Grayson: You succeeded, Ayla. I'm lifting the moratorium for every other member of the press corps. The price was your credential.

Sayyad: He has no grounds.

Grayson: You disrespected the president, the office, and, most importantly, your fellow colleagues. It wasn't a tough sell.

The message is clear: If you play along and serve as a mouthpiece, like Barnes, you will get ahead; however, if you try to perform the watchdog role, you will be tossed aside by the administration and your colleagues.

Sayyad is replaced by Kate Baldwin, another veteran reporter at the *Telegraph*. She spars with Grayson during her first appearance in episode 31.

Baldwin: (holding up credential) This is going to stay around my neck. Can't boot two reporters in a row from the *Telegraph*, certainly not two women.

Grayson: I have no desire to do that. It's an honor to work with you. Pulitzer. Peabody. Get yourself a Nobel, and you'll have the trifecta.

Baldwin: Oh, you're almost charming.

Grayson: Kate, I'm not your enemy here.

Baldwin: You punished Ayla for doing good work. She hit hard, and you hit back, fair enough. Well, I'm going to hit twice as hard as she ever did because I can and because someone should.

However, despite her tough talk, Baldwin is not depicted as a watchdog on the level of Sayyad. She asks tough questions during press conferences but ultimately does not write anything important or damaging. Instead, she caves when her editor expresses doubt in one of her stories, and then begins an affair with Underwood's biographer, Thomas Yates (Paul Sparks). Thereafter, she is shown to be more concerned with her fledgling romance than doing her job effectively.

DISCUSSION

The researchers first asked how female journalists were depicted on the television show *House of Cards*. In seasons 1 and 2, Zoe Barnes is shown to be childlike, unprofessional, and unethical. She has a sexual affair with a source, and often acts more like a stenographer than a watchdog reporter. Her colleague, Janine Skorsky, serves as a mentor but ultimately also is shown to be unethical and unprofessional. In seasons 2 and 3, Ayla Sayyad is depicted as an avatar of exemplary journalism. She is punished for her work, and the audience is introduced to her mentor, Kate Baldwin, who talks tough but ultimately is a watchdog without a bite. Overall, the depictions are mixed. The reporters on *House of Cards* certainly are not portrayed as positively as Mary Richards and Murphy Brown, but they are not shown as ineffective and weak as the female journalists on *The Newsroom* or *Sports Night*. All of the journalists on *House of Cards* are highly successful; they all work at major newspapers or Web sites. However, these characters certainly are working in a man's world, and their lives and careers are situated in overarching patriarchal schemes (Butler 1993; Goodstein 1992; Dow 1990)—namely Underwood's machinations that ultimately put him in the White House. Many of these portrayals also focus on women's relationships with men (Tuchman 1978). Barnes is dependent on Underwood and then Goodwin to help her produce stories, and Baldwin certainly focuses more on a budding romantic relationship than she does on her job.

The researchers next asked about the ethical implications of these characters and portrayals. Previous researchers argued that fictional portrayals have a powerful impact on how viewers perceive people in real life. The myth of highly sexualized female journalists willing to do anything for a scoop has been perpetrated by popular culture, including *House of Cards*. The creators of any television series have an ethical obligation

to their audience to be socially responsible. The creators of a television series should have room for dramatic license, and few, if any, characters in *House of Cards* are portrayed positively. However, there is an academic tradition of criticizing dramatists for their unfavorable portrayals of groups such as journalists (Painter and Ferrucci 2015; Painter and Ferrucci 2012), physicians (Chory-Assad and Tamborini 2003), and ethnicities (Hall 2001) because such portrayals might negatively influence viewers' perceptions of those groups. Entertainment programming also could have an agenda-setting or framing influence on news programming. Such an influence has been shown in relation to conflict diamonds (Sharma 2012) and organ donation (Morgan et al. 2010).

Perceptions of female journalists as "Super Whores" (Ghiglione 1990) can be seen throughout the popular press. Robin Wright, who plays Claire Underwood on *House of Cards*, told *Capitol File* magazine that a member of the Obama Administration told her that Washington reporters routinely sleep with their sources. Dana Perino and Bob Beckel, from Fox News' *The Five*, said on a February 2015 telecast that both male and female reporters sleep with their sources "all the time." Some of these perceptions, unfortunately, are based in reality. There are female journalists who have sexual relationships with their sources. The *Wall Street Journal*'s Gina Chon had an affair with George W. Bush assistant Brett McGurk, and Paula Broadwell was sleeping with David Petraeus while writing his biography. Other journalists such as Maria Shriver and Connie Schultz are married to current or former politicians, and Judy Miller used her long-time partner as a source.

However, a lot of these perceptions are based on depictions seen in popular culture. There is an ethical difference between news media and entertainment. Ethical standards for entertainment programming are less codified when compared to news media (Cenite 2009), but media ethicists increasingly are exploring the ethical implications of entertainment and amusement (Wilkins 2012). Entertainment portrayals, whether in film, television dramas, or sitcoms, must serve an overriding public interest if there are foreseeable and substantial negative consequences to those portrayals (Cenite 2009).

The depiction of female journalists in shows such as *House of Cards* is not benign. First, female journalists have written in the popular press about vitriolic comments focusing on their professionalism and looks, comments that are designed to intimidate and silence journalists writing about controversial topics (Wallace 2014).

Second, previous researchers have argued that cultural conditioning and learning experience affect a woman's career decisions (Hoffner, Levine, and Toohey 2008; Scherer, Brodzinski, and Wiebe 1990) and media portrayals provide socializing messages about women in a certain profession, such as journalism, or women in general (Hylmö 2006; Rosenholtz and Simpson 1984). Females account for 63.5 percent of all journalism and mass communication graduates (University of Georgia 2010). However, a greater percentage of males than females seek reporting jobs at daily, weekly, wire, radio, TV, and cable news organizations, while a greater percentage of females seek jobs at public relations and advertising agencies (University of Georgia 2010). While the researchers are not suggesting there is a direct causal relationship between these tendencies and the negative portrayal of characters such as Zoe Barnes, there could be a negative socializing effect influencing these decisions.

Third, there is continuing discrimination against women in the newsroom. *New York Times* Executive Editor Jill Abramson was fired in May 2014 for being too abrasive and combative, traits revered in male editors such as Ben Bradlee. Just more than one in three newsroom employees are women (Women's Media Center 2014; American Society of Newspaper Editors 2012), and only 34 percent of newsroom supervisors are female (American Society of Newspaper Editors 2012). The leadership numbers drop precipitously in the largest newspapers; only two of the Top-25-circulation dailies, and none in the Top 10, had a female editor in mid-2014 (Strupp 2014). This lack of representation also is true in new media, with only about 10 percent of the most influential political blogs authored by women (Harp and Tremayne 2006). The underrepresentation of females in media could result in certain constituent groups being uncovered or miscovered by media. Gender might influence editorial content and sources (Correa and Harp 2011; Hardin and Shain 2005; Armstrong 2004), as well as format and tone (Meeks 2013). Women in leadership positions also might influence newsroom culture and structure (Geertsema 2009; Everbach 2006).

In social responsibility theory, an organization is obligated to act in a way that benefits society, either directly by advancing social goals or indirectly by avoiding socially harmful acts. The creators of *House of Cards* clearly should have been able to foresee a substantial negative consequence for female journalists, and the portrayals of Barnes, Skorsky, and Baldwin do not serve an overriding public interest. Barnes is shown as a willing stenographer to Underwood's machinations as long as it also furthers her career, Skorsky and Barnes engage in conflicts of interest such as sleeping with sources, and Baldwin places her budding romance over her professional obligation as a White House correspondent. The only positive portrayal is Sayyad, an unflinching watchdog who ultimately uncovers a major political scandal. However, Sayyad is punished for her work—she loses her position as a White House correspondent—while Barnes and Baldwin are rewarded for their unprofessional and unethical behavior. *House of Cards* ultimately is advocating against the watchdog role, especially for female journalists; they are punished for performing the role and rewarded for neglecting it. The researchers, therefore, argue that the depictions of female journalists in *House of Cards* are not socially responsible because such portrayals could have a negative impact on real-world journalists.

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